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# The Spirit of POD: A Network for Development

**Marilla D. Svinicki**

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1992 Recipient of the Bob Pierleoni "Spirit of POD" Award

My friends say that I am not often at a loss for words, but that was certainly my reaction when it was announced that I had been chosen to receive the Pierleoni "Spirit of POD" award. I wish I could have said something very profound at the time, but such occasions are not conducive to brilliant rhetoric. However, I have since had time to reflect on the moment and the award, and now I've been given the opportunity to express in writing what I couldn't express in person: what the "Spirit of POD" represents to me.

I was deeply touched and greatly honored to be given this award. Receiving any professional recognition is gratifying, but to be selected for recognition by one's peers is especially significant. This particular award is even more important to me personally because the characteristics that it represents are those I value deeply, and to be recognized by others as having those characteristics is a very affirming experience. The characteristics of which I speak are present in the very name of the organization; it is first and foremost a **Network** devoted to **Development**.

## The Concept of Network

What does it mean to be a network? This is one of the first characteristics of the "Spirit of POD" that must be understood to appreciate POD's unique qualities. The Network as exemplified by

POD represents different and powerful ways of conceptualizing professional relationships that go far beyond those present in other organizations. Those concepts can be thought of as *Connectedness* and *Support*.

**Connectedness** By definition, a network is a structure of interconnected and interacting individuals. These are not the passive connections of mere acquaintances, but the working connections that extend the effectiveness and reach of the individual through interaction with the collective. This has always been my image of POD. I feel that one of the great strengths of the group is the sense of an array of individuals with very different backgrounds from very different institutions, connected by both their dedication to higher education and the uniqueness of their positions on their own campuses. To function effectively, we need the sense of that larger community as a background to sustain morale and provide an outlet for ideas and frustrations.

In my own case, the knowledge that there are like individuals at institutions all over the country has sustained me through the dark times of faculty indifference, budgetary stasis, and administrative intransigence. When our Center was established in 1974, we were one of a very small number of faculty development centers around the country. None of us really understood the significance of what we were about to do nor did we have any blueprints or models on which to base our programs. It was like beginning a whole new field of investigation; where do you start? And then I attended my first POD workshop and discovered other people with the same problems and ambitions for their campuses. What a relief to find we were not alone and that others were struggling with the same questions. It wasn't that these other people had the answers I was seeking; but to know that there were others made our own quest seem less crazy or futile.

I've never forgotten that experience nor the sense of belonging that quickly developed in that group. To me that came to symbolize one of the strengths of POD: a large network of people engaged in the same struggle on their individual campuses, coming together for mutual support and comfort.

Because it meant so much to me, I've tried to pass that same sense of connection along to those who came after me. Our center receives

many inquiries from people at other institutions who are looking into the feasibility of establishing a development program. They are in the same position we were in so many years ago, feeling many of the same frustrations and uncertainties. I want them to know that they are not alone; there is a group of like-minded individuals around the country, some probably near by, who stand ready to help. After giving whatever I had to offer, I have never hesitated to refer these inquirers to the POD member closest to them in geography or institution type, because I knew they would be received with the grace and camaraderie that greeted me so long ago. At a later date, usually the annual conference, I frequently then meet the colleagues who called, and they have always confirmed my faith in my friends. They tell me how graciously they were received and how much they felt their inquiry had been welcomed. For myself I find that once someone has become connected to the Network in my mind, I can no longer distinguish how long I have known that person; he or she becomes a friend and colleague, after one year or twenty. I think that same spirit pervades all we do.

**Support** Following naturally from the concept of connectedness is that of support. The support available takes many forms. In some cases the support is for the individual. For problems big and small, personal and professional, network members stand ready to help one another. Because many members are housed in one-person offices with no other professionals around to discuss issues, the network serves the important function of an extended community of discourse. Sometimes the nature of our work is confidential, and we are precluded from discussing it freely within the confines of the home institution. At those times it becomes important to have objective, uninvolved colleagues from other institutions who can discuss knowledgeably but dispassionately what might be an explosive issue on the home campus. The network serves this purpose most admirably. In tapping into that type of support, I have often found that what seemed so awful at home is not an isolated incident, but has occurred on other campuses and been survived by all concerned. Somehow that puts the problem in the right perspective and brings it down to a manageable size.

More frequently support is in the form of ideas, materials, and help. This is perhaps the most commented-on characteristic of POD:

the open exchange of all we have. It has always been my experience that POD members give of themselves without hesitation or expectation of return. How often at the conference have you heard presenters give blanket permission for participants to adopt and adapt the hand-outs? The same is true of our time and talents. Until it became too large to be handled efficiently, the organization itself was run entirely by volunteer labor. Even the Executive Director (now President) derived no perquisites from the position. Nevertheless, people were always willing to serve and to contribute for the good of the whole. In my two years as Executive Director, I don't remember ever being turned down when I asked for help from the membership. The newcomers I mentioned earlier have been equally successful. I have heard over and over again about the generosity of POD members, giving of themselves to others who are just starting. This is truly one of the most important characteristics of the organization, which should never be diminished or forgotten.

A final form of support from the community of POD is embodied in the notion that the group collectively is stronger than one individual. We are all aware that a dedication to teaching is not the ticket to fame and fortune on most campuses these days. Those of us who feel that dedication often find ourselves on the fringes of the power structure of the institution and have difficulty being heard in the clamor for attention. However, when we can invoke the collective voice of our professional community, we can sometimes get the attention of the administration. Being able to cite ten similar institutions that have instituted a program like the one in which we are interested has been a powerful tool over the years in convincing risk-averse administrators to take a chance on something new. And we are not above conspiring with our colleagues to collectively introduce an innovation simultaneously and then point to the other conspirators and announce, "ESU is doing it. Shouldn't we?"

## **A Dedication to Development**

This is a *Development* Network. Those are not idle words, and they don't refer simply to the work we do. I believe they refer to our view of life as well. I believe that POD and its members are charac-

terized by a dedication to development: of their colleagues, their institutions and themselves. What does that mean?

Development means change. The Spirit of POD embraces growth and change. From its very beginnings the organization has been open to change. When POD started, its organizers intended it to be different, to represent new ideas and new perspectives, in practice as well as in theory. To let their actions reflect their beliefs, they structured the organization and its activities to be different from the status quo. They designed the governance structure to be collective and consensual in nature; we had a Core Committee rather than a Board of Directors, an Executive Director instead of a President. (It seems sad somehow that outside forces have made us conform to the more traditional titles now, but the method of operating remains the same.) The annual conference was designed as a retreat for the benefit of members rather than a large showcase for the benefit of outsiders. The sessions were intended to be sharing opportunities rather than formal presentations. For a while the wags said that POD meant “participate or die.” But the nature of the conference was true to the nature and purposes of the organization; it was for exchange, not one-way communication. Now other organizations have seen the benefits of such a structure and are moving in that direction for what they think of as “experimental format sessions.”

Development requires reflection, as in being reflective practitioners of our profession. Change for the sake of change is so much empty faddishness. True development means that we have examined the situation, our actions, and our assumptions and theories and found a way to improve on what we have seen. I’m not convinced that we as an organization have been very diligent in this respect over the years. We have been buffeted by the winds of change, sometimes caught up in what is current without examining the degree to which it reflects our values. I’d like to see that become less the case. I’d like to see us ground our actions in some well-designed and tested theories, for our own benefit, as well as to provide a better example for those whose actions we hope to influence. Organizations, like the people in them, go through developmental phases. It’s time we moved beyond the exuberance of adolescence to the mature reflection of adulthood.

It has not always been easy being open to change. In fact, some of that openness was truly put to the test as the organization began to grow. Designed for a small group of intimates, the organizational structure that was so innovative and forward-looking in the beginning became unwieldy and ineffective in some ways as the membership expanded and faculty development moved out of the fringes and into the mainstream of campus life. What had been innovation had become status quo. Would the organization remain true to its mission and develop as the situation changed? It has not been an easy period; there is much about the old ways that is both comfortable and representative of the community's values and therefore hard to see in an objective way. I'm proud to say, however, that the Spirit of POD has remained intact; the organization has embraced those changes that advance the mission while retaining those values that form its bedrock. We have seen that a strong characteristic of the Spirit of POD is an openness to change and a situational flexibility, entertaining the new while retaining the old. We cherish our past, but we look forward to our future.

## **The Spirit of POD: The Next Twenty Years**

I believe these two concepts, **Network** and **Development**, will stand us in good stead for the next twenty years of our existence. If anything, they will be more valuable in the future than they have been in the past. We have already seen a new tool to promote the concept of Network: the electronic bulletin board that was established recently has been such a fascinating and inclusive extension of the individual conversations that have formed the basis of the Network in the past. These and other technological enhancements may make the physical side of maintaining a network simpler. True to our Development side, we should explore these options and be open to the possibilities they raise.

But the real Spirit of POD lies not in the artifacts we create, but the people we are. Concern for the development of people and their institutions spurred the establishment of POD, and the good qualities of the people who founded it set the values and tone of the organization. I believe that anyone who wishes to be a part of the Spirit of POD must understand and embrace these values:

1. That we are a Network that exists for the good of the members, and what each of us does for the others is for the good of all.

2. That we support the Development of all with whom we work—our colleagues, our institutions and ourselves—and therefore maintain a reflective attitude and willingness to examine our assumptions and to risk failure in the interest of growth.

Now that I've speculated on what the Spirit of POD is, do I think I have lived up to those values? Not always, and not perfectly. But they are what I associate most strongly with POD, and they certainly are the goals toward which I am working. Perhaps I'll make some progress in the next twenty years; I know that POD will.